

CENSORSHIP

Who are the Censors?

One never has to look far to identify the censor. The censor is rarely an unrecognizable person from a distant place whose intention is to take away freedoms. Most often, the censor is a friend, or a neighbor, or a community group or even, on occasion, your friendly librarian.

A brief review of current literature reveals that the most common group of people wanting to censor materials are parents wishing to remove books from libraries. These parents are horrified by particular words, descriptions, topics or points of view in the materials assigned or available to their children. These are, for the most part, well-meaning people who believe they are guarding the innocence of their own children. However, by censoring certain items, these parents would be denying the material to other children, thus restricting the free flow of essential learning that takes place in libraries.

In addition to censoring parents, there are other groups bound together by religious, patriotic or other common belief structures. Often these groups feel threatened by a particular ideology or belief with which they do not agree and they target libraries that provide books, displays or other materials about the issue. A common example in libraries today is the topic of homosexuality. Some groups would remove most or all materials about the issue from library shelves, displays and even electronic portals. Out of fear, these groups might even censor materials which discuss, for instance, the struggle for civil and human rights that homosexuals have engaged in over the last two centuries. If these censoring groups were successful in their purging intent, other interested community members would be denied free access to such materials for their own edification.

And yes, there are even censoring librarians. These individuals may have been challenged, by a person or a group, one too many times regarding their choice of library materials and, as a result, are now self-censoring in their selections. Perhaps a particular author was a communist at some time in his/her life and a patron might object to seeing the material on the shelf. Maybe there is a risky word in that children's book. Perhaps the sexual innuendo is a bit graphic or a singer/artist is too over-the-top for someone's taste. The self-censoring librarian may decide that it is better to play it safe and not buy an item before someone can lodge a complaint.

We all have peer groups that influence our behaviors; groups that may guide what clothes we wear, which movies we watch and even the general ways in which we behave. But as librarians, we are called to be leaders by setting the example. We must often be the risk takers as we support First Amendment rights. When we say freedom of speech we have to mean it and we have to mean it for all people, the ones we do not know, the ones who seem strange to us and even the ones we disagree with.

What to do Before the Censor Comes

One of the best ways to deal with a censorship crisis is to be prepared for one to happen. A great place to start is by reviewing, and perhaps formally adopting, the American Library Association [Library Bill of Rights](#) and [Code of Ethics](#). These documents can be reprinted, with permission,

within your library's service and collection development policies. Alternatively, library administrators may use these documents as guidelines for drafting and adopting their own policies.

In the document, "[Dealing with Concerns about Library Resources](#)," the ALA Office for Intellectual Freedom (OIF) reviews the necessary planning and preparation for encountering such a crisis. The important preventative measures recommended by ALA are listed below. Following these measures will not necessarily prevent complaints and inquiries, but will assure your library's preparedness.

1. Maintain a materials selection policy

Your library's materials selection policy should be in writing and should include a notice that it has been approved by the library's governing authority (Board, University, etc.). It should cover all types of library materials and should be revised periodically to ensure that it reflects current policies.

2. Maintain a library service policy

Your library's written service policy should cover registration policies, programming, free distribution of materials, bulletin boards and displays and all library activities and services that could have an impact on access to materials or facilities.

3. Maintain a clearly defined procedure for handling complaints

Keep a copy of the complaint procedure at every public service contact point. Be sure to specify that the complaint must be filed in writing and that the name and contact information of the person filing the complaint must be included.

4. Maintain in-service training

Conduct regular training sessions for staff, administration and the library's governing authority to ensure that all are familiar with the materials selection policy, the service policy and the procedures for handling complaints.

5. Maintain open lines of communication with civic, religious, educational and political bodies of the community

When members of the library's board or its staff address local civic organizations, they should emphasize the library's selection process and be prepared to describe and explain the principles of intellectual freedom.

6. Maintain a vigorous public information program on behalf of intellectual freedom

The library should keep the news media informed of activities pertaining to intellectual freedom, as well as library policies concerning resource selection and use.

7. Be aware of current municipal and state legislation about intellectual freedom and First Amendment rights

What to do When the Censor Comes

The following list is based on the steps recommended by the ALA Office of Intellectual Freedom in the document, “Dealing with Concerns about Library Resources.” These guidelines apply whether the concerns expressed are about book selection or about other resources and services, such as programs in the library, free distribution of materials or bulletin boards and displays. The same principles apply in dealing with the frequent suggestions concerning the labeling of materials to indicate content.

These guidelines apply to complaints from library staff members as well as complaints from library patrons. A library administrator who receives a suggestion or a complaint from a staff member should handle it as seriously as one from a patron, and with equal respect.

Keep these guidelines handy and review them with staff regularly. For more detailed related advice, see ALA’s page on “[Dealing with Challenges to Books and Other Library Materials.](#)”

LISTEN calmly and courteously to the complaint. Remember that the person has a right to express a concern. Listen fully to the grievance. A patron who is complaining about a particular title, for example, may want only to protest about that title, and may not be asking for its removal from the library.

RESPOND with respect, but also with confidence. The goal is to help this person understand the need for diversity in library collections and the use of library resources. Remember, you represent not only this patron, but also those patrons who want or need to use the material in question. If the complaint refers to a particular title, refer to the library’s collection development policy and explain the selection. Your assertiveness and clear support of intellectual freedom could prevent the complaint from going further, once the patron understands that you have strong reasons for keeping the material in the library’s collection.

If you are uncomfortable in confrontational situations, consider attending workshops on assertiveness or on dealing with difficult people. Role-play with colleagues. Confident behavior comes with practice. Not all concerned patrons are “difficult,” but some can be very emotional, even abusive, and you should be prepared to handle their complaints without letting their behavior derail your professionalism.

In the event that the person is not satisfied, advise the complainant of the library policy and procedures for handling library resource statements of concern. If a person does fill out a form about their concern, make sure a prompt written reply related to the concern is sent.

NOTIFY the administration and/or the governing authority of the complaint and assure them that the library’s procedures are being followed. Present full, written information giving the nature of the complaint and identifying the source.

SEEK THE SUPPORT of the local media when appropriate. Freedom to read and freedom of the press go hand in hand.

When appropriate, **INFORM** local civic organizations of the facts and enlist their support. Meet negative pressure with positive pressure.

ASSERT THE PRINCIPLES of the “Library Bill of Rights” as a professional responsibility. Laws governing obscenity, subversive material and other questionable matter are subject to interpretation by courts. Library resources found to meet the standards set in the materials selection or collection development policy should not be removed or restricted from public access until after an adversary hearing resulting in a final judicial determination.

CONTACT: MLA Intellectual Freedom Advisory Panel and the ALA Office for Intellectual Freedom (oif@ala.org) to inform them of the complaint and/or to enlist their assistance.

Works Cited in this article:

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Document Location:

<http://www.mdlib.org/divisions/ifap/censorship.pdf> (revised 04/10/2006)